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ABSTRACT

The unparalleled residue of unsifted primary materials relating to the nineteenth century London theater present tremendous opportunities and challenges for theater historians. The histories of individual London theaters may be studied for insights into changes that distinguished nineteenth century theater from that of the eighteenth century; and an examination of nineteenth century drama provides vital evidence of London life of that period. But because the massive numbers of materials available afford only fitful glimpses of the total reality they represent, a systematic effort is needed for a new, quantitative form of scholarship in artistic and cultural history. A research project begun in 1972 and now titled "The London Stage 1880-1900: A Documentary Record and Calendar of Performances" encompasses a number of projects, including production of a calendar of stage performances, a census of theater archives, a directory of plays, a bibliography of nineteenth century English drama, and a biographical dictionary. A set of computer programs called INFOL-2 has been used for storing records sequentially and has proved satisfactory despite its limitations in processing information that needs to be stored in nested hierarchical relationships. The research project has pointed up the need to explore thoroughly the dimensions of the research task, from the standpoint both of gathering materials and of putting them into useful forms. (GT)

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New Horizons for Research in Theatre History

by

Joseph Donohue

In 1806 John Scott, a prosperous merchant in the Strand, London, decided to indulge his daughter's irrepressible talents by opening a theatre in which she might become a star. Miraculously, the enterprise flourished. The Sans Pareil, as it was first known, drew a substantial clientele evidently sated with the traditional patent house fare available just a walk away at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. More than casual interest lies in this story of one of the earliest "minor" theatres in London, for its success was, in retrospect, emblematic of certain changes from the simpler though lively days of the eighteenth century, changes that distinguish this new age in the history of the theatre. By 1819 Scott had sold out at a nice profit to a pair of entrepreneurs who christened their costly investment The Adelphi Theatre; and so it remained (even up to our own day), sharing the overall prosperity of the Victorian age while its elder rivals, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, dwindled into relative insignificance or, for a term, shifted over to opera.

Meanwhile, the Adelphi pursued a course quite typical of theatrical production in the period and utterly representative of the place of theatre-going in the lives of the masses who populated the largest city in Europe. The fortunes of the Adelphi speak eloquently of the color, the flavor, and the function of the theatre in that long, war-less age.

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Strategically placed in the Strand--"the finest street in Europe," as Disraeli called it--the Adelphi could be termed as early as 1835 "by far the most fashionably attended theatre in London." Earlier, as the Sans Pareil, it had been a focal point of the controversy over the legality of the burletta form (in reality a fight with the patent theatres--which lost--over the rights to perform "legitimate" drama). Not much later, as the Adelphi, its production of Moncrieff's Tom and Jerry; or, Life in London became the first play in London to run for one hundred nights, establishing plays about city life as recurrent features of theatrical fare through the century. Here the talented comedian Charles Mathews gave his fascinating one-man entertainments called, with significant domestic emphasis, "At Homes"; here the nautical melodramas of Fitzball and Irish ones of Boucicault caught the fancy of the town; and here for more than twenty five years in the middle period of the century the ablest manager in London, Ben Webster, presided. It was at the Adelphi that the most important American plays and players, including Laura Keene and Joe Jefferson, were introduced to English audiences; that an entire genre known as "Adelphi dramas" achieved unrivaled popularity in the 'eighties; and that one of the most shocking events in the annals of the theatre, the murder of the leading "leading man" William Terris (then appearing in William Gillette's celebrated American play, Secret Service) was perpetrated at the stage door.

Entertaining or occasionally lurid as these events were, their value for us is more than merely nostalgic. The crumbling program from

Henry Irving's Macbeth at the fashionable Lyceum or the pristine two-color poster with its artful woodblock print from the transpontine Astley's Equestrian Amphitheatre speak with equal voice of the vitality and significance of the theatre--in the widest sense of the word--for that age. That the theatre holds the mirror up to nature is one of the oldest saws in the critical lexicon, but, carefully qualified, it is nonetheless true. To be sure, the London theatre of the nineteenth century reflects the chief features and events of the age--foreign wars, industrialization, urbanization, agrarian reform, imperialism, and a host of movements in the church, education, the arts and elsewhere--but the reflection is prismatic, transformed by the very terms of theatrical convention into something rich and yet, to its audience, reassuringly familiar. The reader in search of deep ideas in the texts of plays from the period is due for disappointment, for the assimilation, the domestication, of ideas, attitudes, and values has been too thorough, has reached too instinctive a level, for explicit statement. Melodrama, it is often argued, constitutes the most basic of theatrical genres because it gives concrete expression to deep-seated human hopes and fears, fantasies and ideals. The same is true of nineteenth-century drama as a whole, regardless of whatever literary value it may have after the fact for a later age preoccupied with its own values and concerns. In fact, those features which twentieth-century and even nineteenth-century literary critics have deprecated are the very ones which make these plays such vital evidence of contemporary life. Nothing reveals a people so lucidly as its pleasures. To understand the character of the people of nineteenth-century Britain, and by extension the nature of their society,

we can hardly do better than attend to the art that was, arguably, the chiefest of their pleasures. To deny the validity of such an enterprise is, I believe, to be blind to the significance of popular art itself. In any case, it cannot be denied that the nature and history of that culture presently occupy the interest of a wide variety of scholars and students, including (but not limited to) theatre historians and students of the drama, social historians, historians of the circus, journalism, costume, business, printing, and graphic arts, musicologists, demographers, sociologists, and bibliographers.

The very vitality, however, of the theatre in the late Georgian and Victorian ages has created an impediment to understanding, for that vitality has resulted in an unparalleled residue of unsifted primary materials. The fact is true of the post-1800 theatre in general. The recently discovered Schubert archive in New York City, vast as it is, typifies the nature and bulk of surviving materials dating from a time before television, radio, and the cinema when the theatre held the central place subsequently occupied by those later media. The survival of these masses of raw data on theatrical performance in the modern age consequently poses an opportunity and a challenge to theatre history--and to information science as well. In fact, the extensive developments in computer technology over the past ten years have thrust the theatre historian willy-nilly into the role of a budding information scientist. Instead of continuing such familiar pursuits as the preparation of monographs on the history of a theatre or the biography of an actor or playwright, the historian of theatrical and dramatic art now finds it not only possible but necessary to undertake more basic tasks, tasks of

a far-reaching nature that require coming to terms systematically with an entire corpus of surviving evidence: playbills, programs, promptbooks, scene designs, dramatic texts in print and manuscript, diaries, account books, scene shop logs, and other characteristic relics of a vital but still only superficially known cultural past.

For the historian of the nineteenth-century London theatre and drama the opportunity is especially great, the challenge formidable. The number of places of theatrical or quasi-theatrical entertainment in London grew from about ten in the 1800-1810 decade to well over 150 by 1870. Already by 1848, the year of revolution, the number of music halls had exceeded the number of theatres. By our current reckoning some 488 London "play places" were active during the century, operating under one thousand or more different names. Although the total number of their performances over the hundred years cannot be exactly estimated, we think that a figure of between 500,000 and 750,000 is realistic and that the surviving theatrical records from this period may document perhaps fifty per cent of that activity. These materials, which lie in daunting profusion in archives in Great Britain and the United States, offer the scholar a singular opportunity to define the nature of popular art in the context of an increasingly middle-class culture.

The art of the London theatres is unusually rich because it combines, often within one evening's presentation at a single theatre, dramatic performances of comedy and farce, melodrama, tragedy, and pantomime with lively entertainments of music, song, dance, spectacle, and other forms whose variety filled three or four or more hours of an evening, appealing

to audiences from almost every stratum of society. Yet the special nature of this activity has in effect served to prevent our understanding its true import and value up to now, for the record of theatrical life in nineteenth-century Britain and its center in London itself survives in dozens of different forms and shapes, largely as uncatalogued "ephemera" or otherwise inaccessible documents in archives often chronically understaffed and inadequately financed. Far from documenting in any proper way the theatre of that age, this massive residue has served to afford even the most determined researcher only fitful glimpses of the total reality it represents. The time has clearly come for a systematic, large-scale joint effort by a team of scholars committed to a new, quantitative form of scholarship in artistic and cultural history.

In November 1972, observing the widespread need for basic factual information about the London theatre of the age and surmising the significance it would have for historians and students of popular art and culture, I and my colleague, Professor James Ellis of Mount Holyoke College, formed a research project called "The London Stage 1800-1900: A Calendar of Performances." Our essential goal was to gather and publish information on what theatres presented what plays by what authors, performed by what actors, supervised and assisted by what other persons. Seeing that the task was a prodigious one, given the scores of theatres active during the century and the voluminous mass of the surviving records, we set systematically to work. Over the six years since the inception of the project substantial progress has been made; an editorial staff of professional historians has been assembled; extensive censuses of primary sources in British and American archives

have been gathered; a one-hundred-page Handbook for Compilers has been prepared and placed in routine use; computer operations have been established at the University of Massachusetts, Eastern Michigan University, and the University of Texas, Austin, to store and retrieve the data collected; playbills and programs have been microfilmed and distributed to our editorial staff; local institutional support has been obtained, including substantial small-scale funding; and the beginnings of outside support have materialized. The goals and methods of the project have been publicized throughout the scholarly community through announcements in journals, the publication of a newsletter, and papers delivered at professional meetings. To judge from the enthusiastic response of our peers, the project serves a useful purpose and is well worth the effort so far expended and contemplated for the future.

On the other side of the balance lie the problems we have encountered. Aside from the inevitable lack of sufficient time and money, there looms the considerable problem of data entry and, behind it, the even more fundamental question of research priorities. To prepare a proper calendar of performances, one needs to have at hand a full list of the theatres active in London during the century. To prepare such a list, one must examine the same playbills and programs whose census forms an indispensable preliminary to calendaring. To deal effectively with the plays cited in the playbills, one needs a bibliography of the acted drama, whose adequacy in turn depends on the availability of first-performance information that can be gleaned most accurately only from the bills and programs themselves. In short, everything is connected with everything else; and, in view of this complexity, we have come to conclude that it is impossible to continue

to carve a comprehensive daily calendar of performances out of the ponderous monolith of surviving primary sources without learning more about their exact dimensions and contents. In simple terms, the difficulty resolves itself into two issues: (1) how to get at the primary materials; and (2) how to record the fact of their survival and the information they contain.

Accordingly, in 1978 we redefined our research program in such a way that pursuing a series of interrelated intermediate goals might carry us to the ultimate one of a comprehensive daily calendar of performances. We have identified certain research projects which we believe are necessary preliminaries to compiling a full and accurate calendar, but which are also in themselves coherent projects with immediately publishable and useful results. To indicate the range of interrelated activities now incorporated as our research program, we have renamed it "The London Stage 1800-1900: A Documentary Record and Calendar of Performances." The name is by design an inclusive phrase, comprehending the overall subject of research, the general approach, and the ideal ultimate goal. Under it we identify a series of particular projects, each of which makes sense as an independent, publishable enterprise and also forms an essential component of research leading ultimately to a calendar of performances. These projects, some already well along, others at the formative stage, are: (1) a calendar of performances on the London stage 1800-1900, compiled segmentally by theatre and decade; (2) a census of theatre archives to identify the precise holdings of playbills and programs; (3) a directory of all the London "play places" in use at any time during the nineteenth century; (4) a bibliography of the drama in English of the nineteenth century; (5) a year-by-year

checklist of periodicals and other secondary sources containing theatrical coverage; (6) a register of production evidence (promptbooks, designs, illustrations, etc.) for the nineteenth-century London theatre; (7) a survey of relevant holdings in public archives and non-theatrical special collections; and (8) an abstract of information on theatrical personnel from standard reference works, leading to a biographical dictionary. Presently we are concentrating almost entirely on a calendar of the Adelphi Theatre for the ninety-four years of its history in the century, on a calendar of the first decade in general, and on a bibliography of nineteenth-century British drama, based on the extensive copies of plays reproduced in the Readex Microprint microcard publications.

Announcements of the revised research program have appeared over the past year or so in various journals, and a more detailed description has been sent to those persons on our mailing list. Rather than briefly summarize information already widely circulated, let me now turn to the related and essential question of the impingement of the computer on our work and, by extension, on theatre history in general.

The survival of masses of data on theatrical performance in the modern period poses a challenge not only for theatre history but for information science as well. Great developments have occurred over the past ten years, both in hardware (that is, the electronic machinery involved in computation) and in software (that is, the programming which enables us to make effective use of the technical capabilities of the hardware). Essentially, the challenge for the theatre historian is to make such a thorough analysis of the informational characteristics of the evidence he or she wishes to work with that the result is a set of

clear, pertinent, and mutually exclusive categories of data. The correlative task of information science is to provide the means of storing in the computer information identified as falling into one or another of these categories, in such a way that selective or pervasive access to the information is assured. More specifically, computer programs must at the least afford access to the data either by category (e.g., play titles, cast lists) or by pattern match (e.g., all records of performances of Under the Gaslight). The method of data entry must be relatively simple and straightforward, and the programs must be flexible enough to deal with a combination of fixed-length and variable-length records.

Early investigations suggested that our needs required either custom-designed programming or the purchase of a similarly expensive general data base facility. An inexpensive alternative, however, presented itself in a set of programs called INFOL-2 (an acronym for INFormation Oriented Language, in a second, revised version). INFOL-2, which is particularly good at free text search, hierarchical sorting, multiple retrieval of data items, and flexible formatting of reports, has proved suitable to our present needs and holds reasonable promise for future requirements as well, despite certain limitations noted below. Briefly described, INFOL-2 programs, which store records sequentially--one after another in the order in which they are entered into the computer--are based on the concept of a set of mutually exclusive categories of information, numbered consecutively, which together form a logical record. Data may be entered in variable field lengths--a good thing, since a play title may be three or four characters or over one hundred characters in length, and a cast list may have six role-actor pairs, or sixty. The

programs work extremely well on such simple, straightforward data as census records of playbills. The 365-page census of Sans Pareil/Adelphi holdings in several archives extracted from our file of this data in summer 1977 took three-hundred seconds of machine time, a not unreasonable amount considering that the programs were required to sort well over 30,000 records in order to arrange them in a single chronological sequence characterized by nested hierarchies: all records for a given season were sorted together; within that season, all for a given performance date; within that date, all for a given source date (a source bearing a given date may cover more than one performance); and within that source date, alphabetically by archival abbreviation.

The fact remains, however, that programs such as INFOL-2 have certain substantial limitations. Although such programs, which store records in a linear sequence, are adaptable to a wide range of situations in which clear data categories are identified and data are sorted in various ways, they do not adapt well to information which, because of its basic characteristics, needs to be stored in nested hierarchies. For it is one thing to extract information from a data base according to several linked sortkeys, and quite another to store data in hierarchical relationships. The calendar of performance provides a basic example of this need for nested storage. Three plays, let us say, are performed at a given theatre on a given night. Each play has a title, a cast list, and information on incidental music, singing, or dancing. What is to be our unit of storage? That is, what will the logical record of performance comprise? Will it encompass only a single play? Or will it comprehend all plays on a single night at a given theatre? If it takes in just a single play, one title will appear in the title category, but a series

of role-actor pairs will have to be entered in the role-actor category; hence these pairs form what is essentially a repeating group nested within the larger hierarchical level represented by the title of the play in which these roles and actors appear. If, on the other hand, the logical record comprises all plays performed on a given date at a given theatre, then the two-level record of play title and cast list just described becomes itself a repeating group nested within the greater hierarchical level at which the complete performance resides. Because INFOL-2 can deal with only a two-level relationship, the result is that we must build into our data structure a linking of each "play" record by date and theatre to each other "play" record for the same theatre and date.

There are still other limitations of sequential storage too complex to describe here. We live with these limitations, since we cannot afford not to. The software technology already exists, of course, for programs with multiple hierarchical storage; and that is only the first characteristic of the sophistication of data storage already possible. The long-range prospects appear bright, partly because of increasing micro-miniaturization of hardware, with consequent gains in efficiency and lowered costs, both of purchase and operation, and partly because astonishing gains in efficiency of storing machine-readable data are resulting in the development of widely affordable interlocking data bases --so-called "Data Management Systems." Meanwhile, we already have available the technology to generate microfiche directly from the computer, bypassing paper copy, with a consequent ease and economy in getting data out to the potential user. As always, however, we face the problem of getting the data in in the first place.

If there are any lessons, or caveats, to be drawn from the experience of our first several years, they have to do with the need to explore thoroughly the dimensions of the research task, from the standpoint both of the nature of surviving primary materials and of the relationship between those materials and the means, electronic and otherwise, of putting them into forms useful to the scholar in the field.

I would add one further point. In simple, pragmatic terms, the only way to put together a large reference work such as a calendar of performances is to involve a lot of people in it. The more knowledgeable these persons are, the better the product. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, the fact is that no theatre or drama department today offers a course in research methods or techniques which addresses itself to the problems of cooperative scholarship dealing with masses of primary documents, nor does any graduate program in the humanities require an introduction to techniques of information science--that is, a rudimentary course in using the computer as a tool for research or bibliographical purposes. It would be a pleasure to learn of such efforts. At any rate, I suspect that it is only after we have spent a decade training our graduate students in these methods and, more important, in demonstrating what they are good for, that we will begin to see quantitative scholarship in theatre history assume the important place that the surviving materials and the very nature of the subject matter would seem to hold out for it.